

Scripture: John 11:38–44

Sermon: Take Off the Grave Clothes and Let Him Be Free / translated by Melody Ouk

1.

This past winter was exceptionally harsh. Even in mid-March, temperatures plummeted to -22°C, accompanied by heavy snowfall exceeding 30 centimeters. Yet, the more severe the winter, the greater the joy of welcoming the spring. This year, the arrival of spring feels more anticipated and welcome than ever before. It is no mere coincidence that Easter falls at the very threshold—the beginning—of spring, following the depths of winter. The saying, "Without the Cross, there is no Resurrection," has long served within church tradition as a reminder of the profound significance of the season of Lent. Indeed, it is precisely because of the agonizing suffering of the Cross that the joy of the Resurrection is bound to be so immense. If you have spent this Lent bearing your own cross and practicing self-denial, the joy with which you welcome the Resurrection will surely be extraordinary. This Easter is a season of profound significance, a time to commemorate the Resurrection of our Lord, who triumphed over death on the Cross. In the tradition of the Church, it has long been customary to exchange a special greeting at Easter: "Christ is risen!" to which the response is, "He is risen indeed!" Let us now join together in exchanging these Easter greetings with the fellow believers seated all around us.

I remember, from my childhood, holding my mother's hand as we attended the Easter sunrise service together. The venue for this service was not the church sanctuary; instead, we gathered at the graveyard situated on the hill behind our neighborhood. Timed to coincide with the 4:00 AM prayer hour, the women of the congregation, clad in traditional white mourning attire, made their way toward the gravesites. It was there, standing before the tombs, that we offered our Easter sunrise prayers. On Easter morning, the symbolism of the tomb held profound significance. Jesus's empty tomb signified the Resurrection. Since the Lord's absence from the grave demonstrated that He was no longer subject to the dominion of death but rather to the dominion of life, the empty tomb stood as the ultimate symbol of the Resurrection. Perhaps that is why, even though we were not standing before *the* empty tomb, we chose to worship there, amidst the graves. I recall that, in my young mind, as we worshiped in that dark graveyard setting, I prayed with a lingering sense of anxiety, wondering what I would do if one of the tombs were to suddenly crack open.

2.

The story in today's scripture passage recounts events that took place just prior to the commencement of Jesus' intense suffering in Jerusalem. Bethany is a small village situated about 1.7 miles down the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, located to the east of Jerusalem. It appears that whenever Jesus felt physically and mentally weary after praying on the Mount of Olives, He would find rest in this village. For there, He had friends who welcomed Him. The most prominent among those who welcomed Jesus in Bethany was the family of Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary. Lazarus is introduced as one whom Jesus loved (v. 3) and as His friend (v. 11). When Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had already been dead and buried for four days. The stone door of the tomb was firmly sealed, and the body was tightly wrapped in burial cloth. Addressing Martha, his grieving sister, Jesus revealed His true identity (using the phrase "*ego eimi*"—"I am"). He declared: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (vv. 25–26). Standing before Lazarus's tomb, Jesus shed tears, a rare display of emotion for Him. First, Jesus commanded that the stone sealing the tomb be rolled away. Then, He called out in a loud voice: "Lazarus, come out!" At that moment, from the darkness of the tomb emerged Lazarus, the man who had died, his hands and feet still bound with burial cloths and his face wrapped in a linen cloth. Finally, Jesus gave the command to unbind him, to remove the cloth that

restricted his movement, saying, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." The resurrection of Lazarus is significant in that it symbolically foreshadows the triumph over death, the Resurrection, that Jesus would soon accomplish. Lazarus's resurrection served as a preview of Jesus's own impending resurrection.

3.

The original meaning of the word "resurrection" is "to rise again." Both the Greek term *Anastasis* and the Latin-derived *Resurrection* carry this same meaning: the act of rising once more. Resurrection is the act of rising again, a comeback. Jesus' command to Lazarus to "come out" was directed at a person who had fallen into a state of absolute helplessness, bound hand and foot, and was completely enveloped by the values of mortality, values destined inevitably to perish. The moment Jesus' voice reached Lazarus, who lay helplessly in the tomb, surrounded by the aura of death, he regained his agency; he became an upright walker once more, striding purposefully on his own two feet. Yet, because of the strips of cloth still wrapped around his body, he remained a mere object rather than fully reclaiming his independence. There were others who helped bring Lazarus back to life and enabled him to walk again. As portrayed in the scripture, Lazarus was a man who benefited immensely from his friends. By having Jesus as a friend, he was able to overcome even death itself and rise again. Furthermore, Jesus instructed others to unbind Lazarus, to remove the grave clothes and burial cloths that tightly constricted him and held him in an unnatural state of confinement. Although Lazarus had been restored to life, having been dead for four days, his grave clothes and burial cloths must have been saturated with the fluids and putrid stench of a decaying corpse. Those who undertook the task of unwrapping him surely endured a grueling ordeal. Yet, to the friends who loved Lazarus, such labor was a trivial matter, for their sole desire was to see him walk about in freedom. Thus, thanks to his friends, Lazarus not only regained his life but was also empowered to walk about freely.

4.

In the story of Lazarus's resurrection, our focus lies on his friends: Jesus and the friends who helped unbind him from his grave clothes. If living out the resurrection means rising from a state of helpless collapse to stand upright and walk in freedom once again, then it follows that there were people who helped make that resurrection possible. In this passage, Jesus refers to those who assist others in living out the resurrection as "those who have been sent." "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that **you sent me**." In the Gospel of John, Jesus expresses a unique sense of self-identity, specifically, the consciousness of being "the One who has been sent." Jesus understood that, as the One sent by the Father, living a life of complete obedience to God's will was the true way to bring Him glory. Even in the prayer He offered to God just before raising Lazarus, Jesus prayed, "Raise Lazarus to life, so that these people may believe that You sent Me." Remember that living out the resurrection means recognizing the will of the One who sent you and living in obedience to that will. When the One who sent Him asked Him to bear the cross—understanding that doing so would fulfill righteousness—Jesus remained obedient to God's will to the very end. He did so because He trusted that the One who sent Him would raise Him up again. This very faith—the conviction that the One who sent us takes full responsibility for our lives—can be described as the first step toward living out the resurrection. As the One who had been sent, Jesus understood that raising Lazarus to life was the will of the One who sent Him, and He acted in obedience to that understanding. We too, each and every one of us, are here as those who have been sent. We are here in this place precisely because God has sent us to this distant, foreign land. We have not simply ended up here by mere chance. As someone who once served as a missionary in China, I often reflect on this very thought: After desiring so deeply to go to China, why was I expelled after only four years, only to drift into the United States, a place I had never planned to visit? I have come to realize that the Lord sent me

here with a profound purpose: to lift up those who have collapsed amidst the shadows of death and to help them stand tall and walk once again. The same applies to each of you. God has bestowed upon you all authority in heaven and on earth and has sent you to this very place. He sent you to help those who, like Lazarus, remain trapped within their own caves, unable to emerge, and who are engulfed by the terror of death. God sent us here to assist and set free those who lack the strength to cast off, by their own power, the grave clothes and burial cloths of despair and frustration that bind them. We are all God's people empowered by the life force God has given us, sent here to help our neighbors rise again, so that they may live freely as independent human beings. Never forget that living out the reality of the Resurrection means reaching out to the neighbors God has placed in our path and dedicating our lives to helping them rise and walk once more.

5.

In *Crime and Punishment*, the novel by Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky, we encounter a protagonist who collapses and crumbles under the weight of the very crime he has committed. This young man, named Raskolnikov, ends up murdering an elderly pawnbroker. He held the belief that the world is divided into two distinct categories of people: the ordinary and the extraordinary. He reasoned that extraordinary figures, such as Napoleon, had taken many lives, yet their killings could be rationalized. Thus, in an attempt to prove that he, too, was an extraordinary individual, he resolved to murder the old pawnbroker. He viewed the old woman as a greedy and utterly useless presence in society, and by killing her, he sought to validate his own exceptional nature. However, he ends up killing not only the old woman but also her niece, who happened to be present at the scene of the crime. The novel offers a detailed portrayal of the internal turmoil Raskolnikov endures following the murders, specifically, the conflict between his intellect and his conscience, and the profound anxiety stemming from the crushing guilt that weighs upon him. It is true that the depiction of the protagonist's psychological instability is so detailed and extensive that it can, at times, feel somewhat tedious. Yet, the true brilliance of this novel lies in its epilogue. Ultimately unable to bear the burden of his guilt, Raskolnikov turns himself in and is sentenced to penal servitude in Siberia. He is accompanied into Siberian exile by a young woman named Sonya, a prostitute who had turned to sex work out of economic necessity. Even after arriving in Siberia, Raskolnikov appears unable to fully acknowledge that his philosophical worldview was flawed. He remains unable to integrate with the other prisoners, persisting in his isolation and continuing to live a life that feels akin to being trapped within a tomb. Throughout this ordeal, Sonya continues to send him letters and visit him, steadfastly dedicating herself to caring for him until the very end. As the protagonist lies ill, he gradually begins to open his heart to Sonya's love; then, at a pivotal moment, the beliefs and ideologies he had clung to come crashing down, and he chooses to embrace a new life. That pivotal moment is precisely the scene where Sonya reads a passage from the Gospels to Raskolnikov, who lies slumped helplessly with his head resting on her lap. As Sonya reads the very Scripture we examine today, the story of the Resurrection of Lazarus, Raskolnikov weeps before her and is reborn as a completely new person.

As I have mentioned, the resurrection of Lazarus represents the resurgence, the resurrection, of one who was dead, imprisoned, and bound; it stands as a quintessential biblical event symbolizing a profound transformation. Through the episode of Lazarus's resurrection, the author seeks to portray the spiritual resurrection and radical transformation of the young Raskolnikov, a man who had collapsed and tragically lost all meaning in life under the crushing weight of sin. The Bible declares that the wages of sin, that is, the penalty for sin, is death (Romans 6:23). Thus, the resurrection of Lazarus served as the very archetype for the spiritual resurrection of the young Raskolnikov, who had died as a consequence of his sin. Why then was it Sonya, a former prostitute, who read the account of Lazarus's resurrection? It appears that Dostoevsky envisioned

Sonya as an agent of Jesus. In the biblical account of Lazarus's resurrection, Jesus issued the command, but there was an agent, someone else, who opened the tomb and unbound Lazarus from the grave clothes that tightly enveloped him after he had returned to life. Acting as Jesus's agent, Sonya facilitated the event of Raskolnikov's resurrection. As a consequence of the crime he had committed, Raskolnikov was a man cut off from the world, imprisoned within a tomb of his own making. His inner self was rotting, festering, and on the verge of bursting open. His entire being was ensnared by the consequences of sin: chaos, madness, and a state of spiritual wandering and fragmentation. It was Sonya who undertook the role, standing in the place of Jesus, of disarming this tormented soul. Through an unexpected confession, Sonya brought the burden of sin with which he had been wrestling in isolation out into the light; she opened the door, enabling Raskolnikov to emerge from the cave of suspicion and fear he had harbored toward others. And that is what helped to untie and break free from the snares of sin.

6.

Although her prostitution was an unavoidable means of survival undertaken to support her family, Sonya was nonetheless a prostitute, and she must have been tormented by the guilt associated with it. Yet, through the Gospels, she came to grasp the reality of the forgiveness of sins; she was someone who had personally experienced liberation and freedom from the bondage of sin. Because she had wrestled with the problem of sin herself, I believe she was uniquely able to understand and offer aid to Raskolnikov, who had been knocked down by the crushing blow of sin's power. Sonya served as a guide, a "forgiven healer" or a "wounded healer", leading Raskolnikov toward Jesus. This is precisely why Jesus set us free from sin: we, too, were once people suffering under the influence of sin, but through the Lord's forgiveness and the love of the Cross, we have experienced a new life. I believe Jesus now desires for us to step forward as "forgiven healers," reaching out to others who are groaning under the weight of sin to share with them the true meaning of love and acceptance. If, through you, someone gains the courage to rise again and is led to Jesus Christ, would that not be the very essence of fulfilling the mission of one who has been sent? Our Lord desires that, through you, many people may find the courage to rise once more and be set free to walk in liberty. To live with the faith that the One who sent me takes full responsibility for my life, and to live with the realization of the mission that He raises me up to bring healing to others, what else could such a life be but a life that truly embodies the Resurrection? In the name of the Lord, I pray that each of you, empowered by the Risen Lord to live as the true agents of your own lives, may participate in the precious ministry of the Resurrection, bringing freedom to others.